

Teaching Ethics: What's Our Responsibility?

Last year I designed an exercise on leadership styles for my Group Communication class and discovered something very disturbing about my students' sense of ethics. I would like to see an ongoing discussion about the university's expectations for ethical student behavior and about what we can do to change the attitude that it's all right for students to cheat in order to "get ahead."

In my classroom exercise, I divided the class into three groups, selecting leaders for each group and privately telling each leader to adopt a specific leadership role. One would be an autocrat and rule with an iron hand. Another would lead democratically, helping the group arrive at a consensus by soliciting the input of group members. The third student would be a laissez-faire leader, sitting back and letting the group do whatever it felt like doing, giving as little direction as possible.

The class was then given a case study about a student named Bob who needed to get a "B" in a particular class in order to keep his scholarship. The graduate teaching assistant for the class had been given the next test and answer key in advance and for \$10 would provide the questions and answers. What should Bob do? Go to the GTA and ensure his "B"? Or go to the professor and blow the whistle?

The autocrat had been instructed to convince his group that this was an unethical practice, that Bob should not participate, and that Bob should inform the professor. The democratic leader was instructed to help the group arrive at a solution that everybody could live with. The laissez-faire leader was told to simply go with the flow.

Each group's discussion was different. There was heated conflict in the autocrat's group. At one point, a student suggested that they needed a new leader and asked the other students to vote the autocrat out of his position. All the students voted to oust the autocrat, but he held strong, as instructed. The autocrat could not convince any of the students that Bob's behavior was unethical.

In the group headed by the democratic leader, one very assertive and opinionated person suggested that Bob was only using the resources available to him. Other group members agreed that consulting the GTA and getting the test questions beforehand was not cheating. The democratic leader personally disagreed but the group saw the situation in "pragmatic" terms: Bob would lose his scholarship if he didn't get a B in this class. The group concluded that the

end justified the means and worked out a compromise position where Bob would consult the GTA but not get the exact questions and answers.

The group with the laissez faire leader was frustrated and complained that their leader didn't give them enough direction. Ironically, this group explored the ethical issues more thoroughly than either of the other groups and was the only group to agree that the practice was unethical, that Bob should not participate, and that the professor should be informed, anonymously, that this practice was occurring.

After the two groups had come to a decision (the autocrat's group was deadlocked and probably would have stayed deadlocked through the next semester), I asked the students to describe the characteristics of their leaders. The group described the autocratic leader as dogmatic, domineering, disrespectful, and insensitive. The democratic leader was praised for seeking input, encouraging the group to consider all aspects of the problem, providing direction, and for influencing the final decision. They were satisfied with their leadership and characterized it as an effective style. The group led by the laissez faire leader described him as being "out of the loop," noncaring, too laid back, and as having a "whatever goes" attitude. They were very frustrated and suggested that they would not want to work under that type of leadership again.

I initially designed this exercise to clarify these different leadership styles, and as the students were leaving the class they told me how much they had enjoyed the class period. Theory had been brought to life. I left that class feeling as if I had done something important, something innovative. I even bragged to my department head about my wonderful teaching experience. But the glow of that class soon dimmed as I began to think about the conclusions my students had reached. I had made the differences between leadership styles very clear but the majority of my students had concluded that cheating was okay. While I was patting myself on the back for being a good teacher, I was missing a much larger issue and, I believe, failing my students.

Much to my discomfort, Chancellor Coulter diagnosed my failure during his Life of the Mind Lecture in April. As he talked about the need for university representatives to act as agents of social change and for faculty to teach citizenship and values, I felt like the sinner on the front row of the Methodist Church awaiting confession. Dr. Coulter suggested that the teaching of values and ethics had been left to the church and the home, but he reminded faculty that we share this responsibility and need to be exemplars of higher standards.

I missed a wonderful opportunity to be an exemplar of a higher standard for my students. In the discussion about leadership roles, I could have said in no uncertain terms that Bob's behavior was unethical. I could have emphasized that ends do not justify means. I could have made sure that my students understood that cheating is not the right way or the best way to get ahead. But given my students' response to an autocratic leadership style, would these declarations have been successful or counterproductive? The democratic style would apparently have pleased the students but would not have communicated what I wanted them to understand. And adopting a laissez-faire leadership style might have had led to the right conclusions, but the students would have rejected the teaching style. Did I do the right thing by not voicing my opinion?

As a community of scholars we need to emphasize ethical practices in the classrooms, but how must we go about it to be successful? I know that many disciplines have specific courses in ethics, but I think we must stress that ethics is not a class you take and then forget about after the class is over. We need to make ethics a part of every class; students need to be reminded that ethical behavior is expected and that unethical behavior will be punished.

The group exercise on leadership was probably as important for me as it was for my students but for different reasons. My eyes were opened to a very disturbing attitude and a vexing problem about how to change it.

Betty Farmer, Communication and Theatre Arts

Comments or Questions?

If you would like to make comments about this essay or ask questions of Betty please send your questions or comments by the 8th of the month to Terry Nienhuis (FCTE; phone: 7196; WP Mail/Vax: Nienhuis). Please indicate whether you are willing to be quoted or prefer to remain anonymous.